

# John Grade: Engineering Entropy

John Grade is a connoisseur of dissolution. Over the past few years, his art has been an exercise in refined decomposition. This is not to deny his consummate skill as a craftsman and engineer, however. Indeed, at the core of Grade's work lies a vital dichotomy between masterful execution and planned ruination. Such a creative interplay of control and abandon has produced a compelling series of sculptural projects.

Since receiving a BFA from Pratt Institute in 1992, the Seattle-based Grade (pronounced GRAD-deb) has gained recognition for meticulously wrought sculptures in dialogue with the landscape. Grade's involvement with the laws of disintegration was fueled by his travels and geographic study. An avid hiker and mountain climber, he has traversed the terrain of five continents, from Utah to Uganda, Ireland to India. Often traveling for days without encountering people, Grade is on intimate terms with the earth's topography, keeping close company with deserts and oceans, canyons and cliffs.

These far-flung excursions found expression in Grade's work of the late 1990s through 2004. Several sculptures from this period were organic abstractions, suggestive mergers of animal, vegetable and mineral forms. With titles such as *Stem*, *Stavel*, *Rift* and *Hide*, these early works evoke the systems and structures of growth.

Grade's familiarity with natural cycles was furthered by his interest in ancient



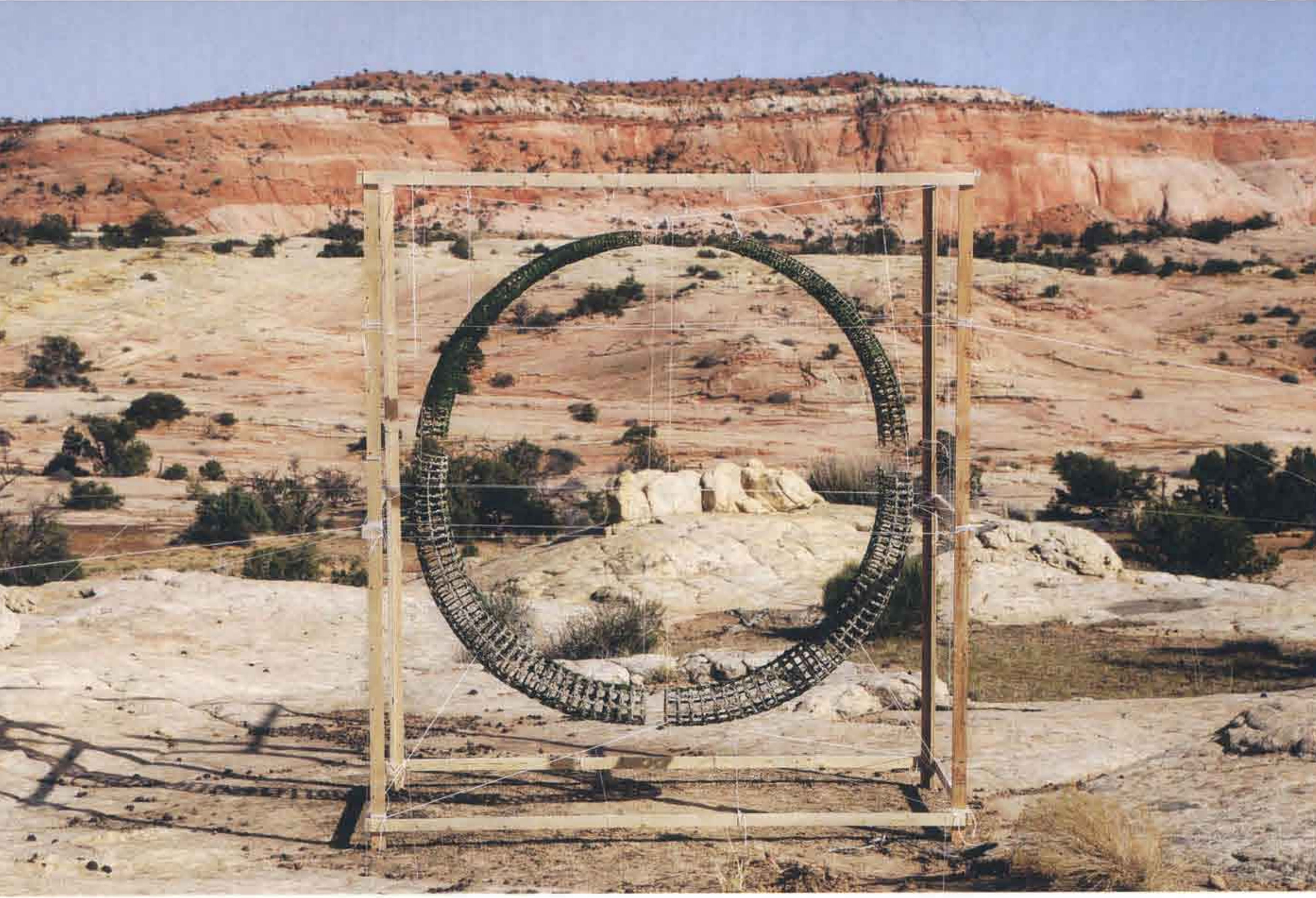
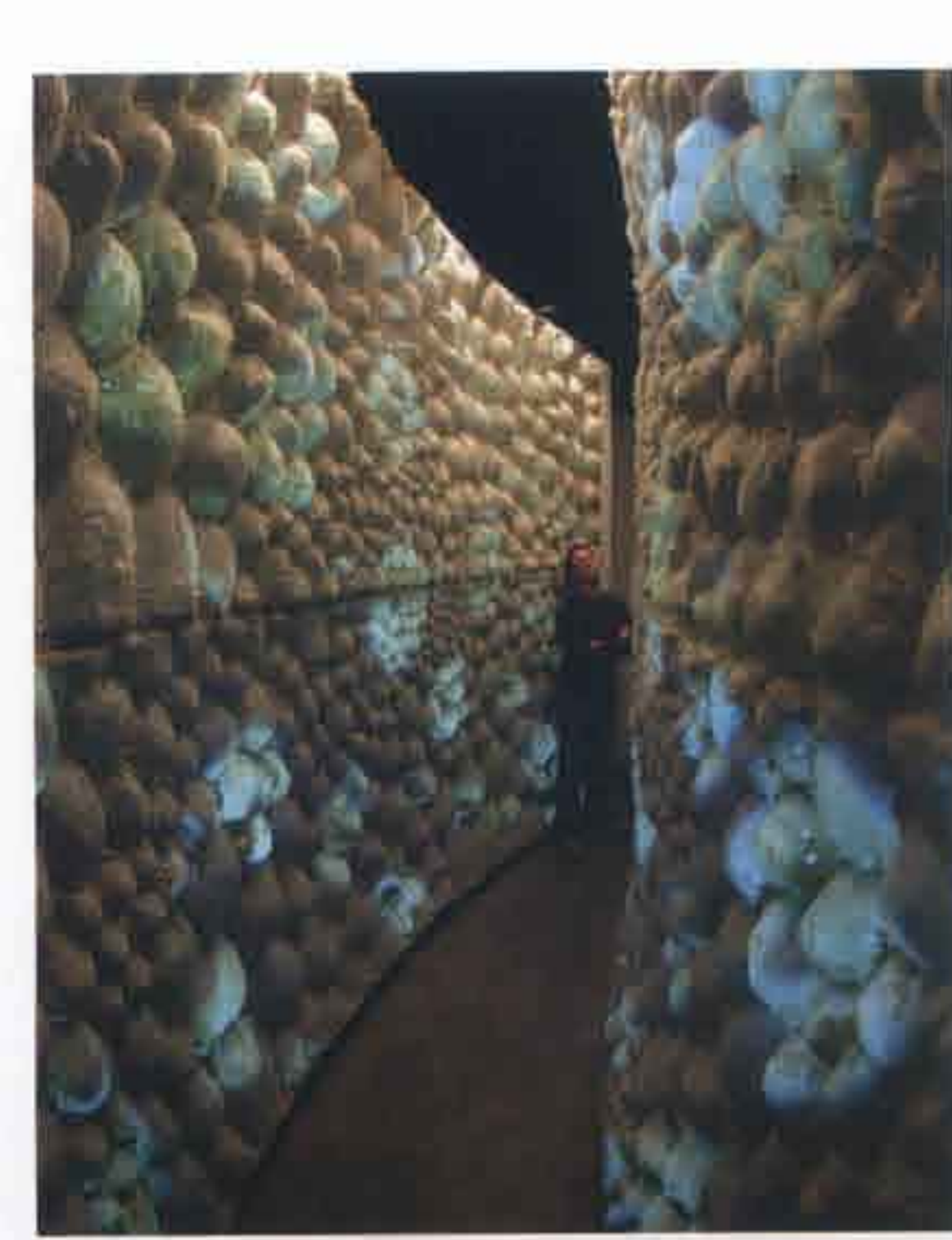
Above: Detail of *Cleave* showing the surface backlit with video projection.

Left: An environment unto itself, *Cleave*, 2006, made of clay, goat fur, cast resin and video projections, 12 x 24 x 24 ft., forms an imposing interior passageway for the viewer.

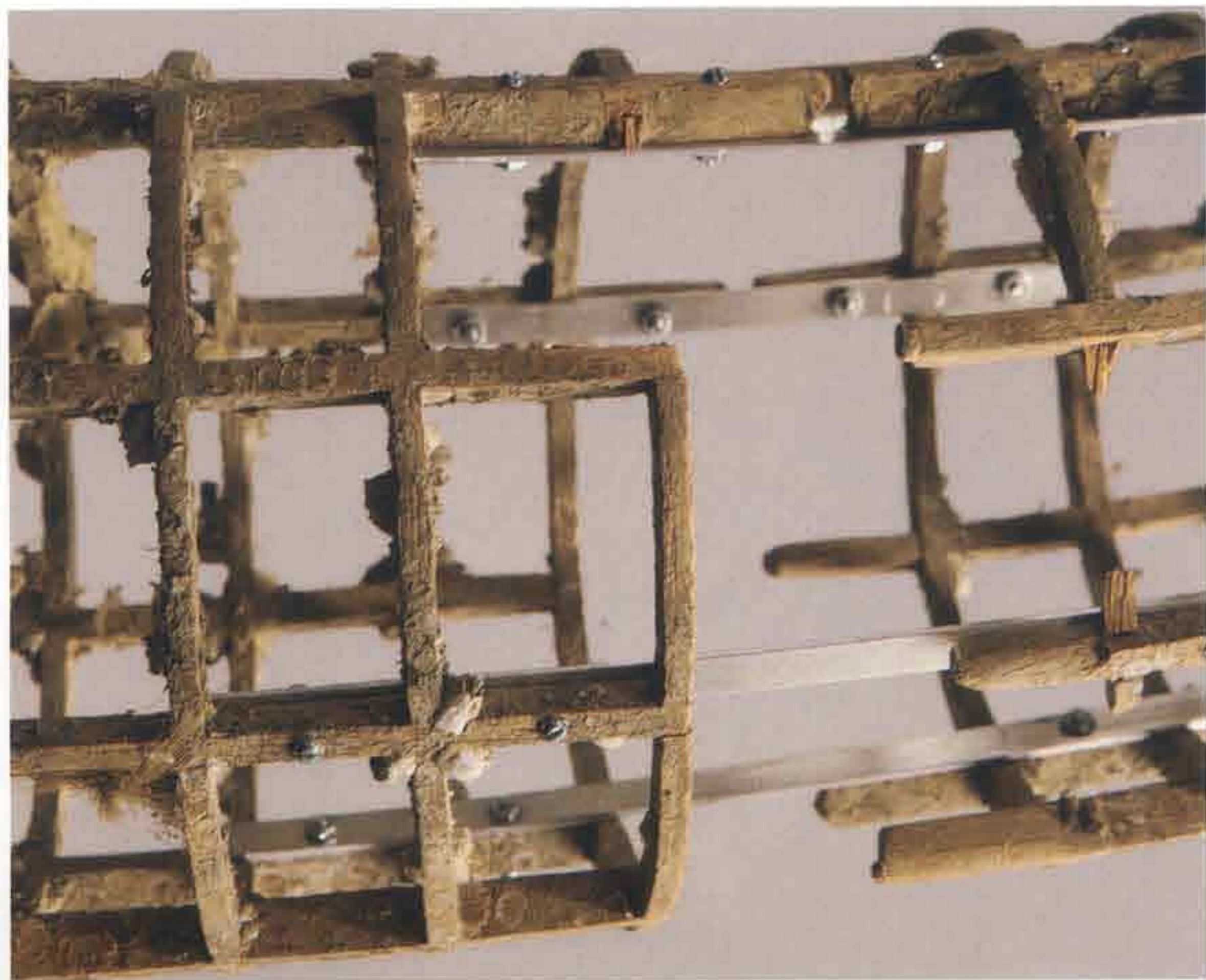
burial practices. Visiting funerary sites—whether the pyramids of Egypt, the tree trunk tombs of Vietnam or the funeral towers of Peru—he pondered the ways that human remains were returned to the land. Grade himself has had brushes with death: once while trapped in a canyon. This taste of mortality, and of nature's ferocity, has come to inform Grade's sculptural inquiries. In addition, his research into catastrophe theory provided him with a taxonomy of collapse and insight into how things fall apart. Grade's focus on funerary rites and the dynamics of disaster does not bespeak a morbid mind or even an acceptance of death's inevitability. Rather, the artist proceeds from a stance of curiosity. "I can't say that I accept death, but I do think it's interesting," he admits. "Dying is messy, and the failure of the body can be frightening, but this breaking down inspires my work." It is precisely Grade's embrace of the splendor of decay that makes his art so engaging.

Grade's sculpture *Cleave*, 2006, marked a turning point in his efforts to convey the landscape's potent grip. The work is partly rooted in his experience of being caught in a ravine, an event at once frightful and sublime. While his earlier sculptures were self-contained entities that reflected natural environs, *Cleave* is an environment unto itself that immerses viewers in a shifting realm of texture, light and smell. Inside the large passageway coated with goat hair and clay, one is consumed by the earth's sensual cleavage, replete with wonder and fear.

*Cleave* also signaled Grade's shift toward installation and the



Above and right: *Collector* in its second outdoor phase, sited in Utah on the Escalante Plateau in a framework made by Grade so that desert birds could feed on the aquatic crust and the sun could roast it dry.



and final setting, within the forest's birch grove (and with jalapeño flavoring to deter all but birds), the sculpture lived out its intended scenario and was consumed by feathered aides.

Grade's latest site-specific project, *Circuit*, 2010, sprang from a vision the artist had of dark forms ascending a snowy mountain. This poetic image has catalyzed a project of epic proportions. To stage the adventure of this five-ton sculpture required countless hours of planning and labor, five paid workers, 30 volunteers and an additional 150 helpers to lug the pieces up a slippery slope. Composed of ceramic, gypsum, resin and netting, all of which are benign materials when they decompose, the monumental work will reside for the length of a year on a mountain in the Pacific Northwest.

Prior to its remote placement on the Washington Cascades, in January 2011, *Circuit* was exhibited in New York and Seattle. At the Cynthia Reeves Gallery in New York City, the pod-like units were arranged in an ellipse, with alternating concave and convex panels. Visitors could nestle in the over-life-size chambers, which offered the shelter of shallow caves. Constructed of numerous contoured slabs, each given a varied surface of nodes, they nonetheless lock together to form a coherent whole. Within the gallery, these handsome structures seemed expectant and hushed, waiting in the

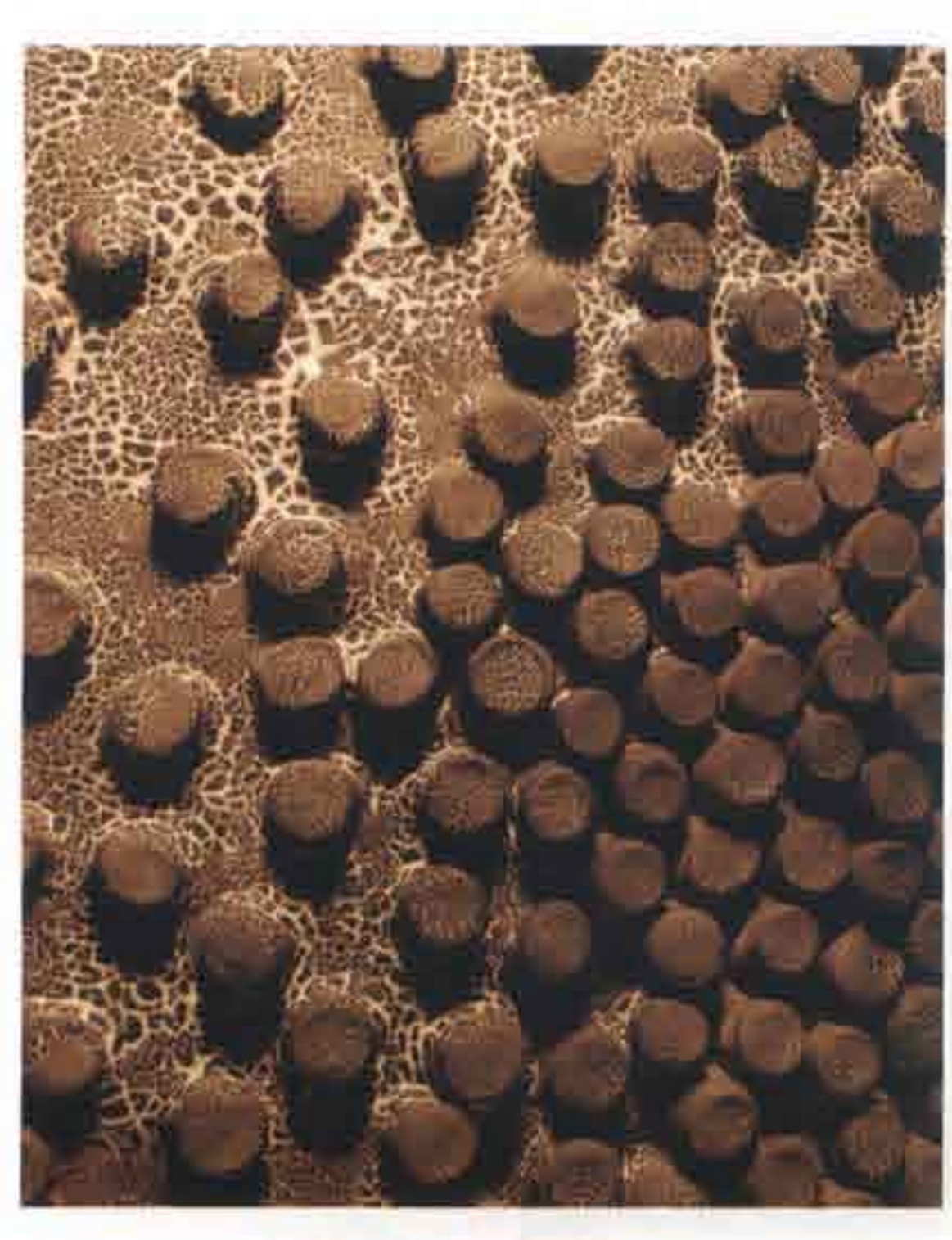


Above, below and opposite: Grade's latest work, *Circuit*, 2010, glazed ceramic bonded with gypsum-based polymer to corn-based resin embedded with marine netting, 9 x 24 x 24 ft., will have an indoor and outdoor life. First shown at the Cynthia Reeves Gallery in New York City, the five-ton sculpture will be exhibited in Seattle before being placed in different sites on a mountain in the Washington Cascades for a year.

wings before their grand performance in the larger world. In keeping with Grade's own evolution, *Circuit* expanded the variables of his artistic approach. For the first time, a portion of his sculpture will be held back from the wild and retained for comparative purposes. Grade aims to pursue this avenue further, exploring the effect of multiple sites, rather than just one or two settings, upon the same form. In the case of *Circuit*, the eight main units will be set at different elevations and in opposing directions. Each piece will be given a distinctive locale, enacting Grade's notion that "even the slightest variance in context can have such a huge impact."

When speaking with Grade, it soon becomes clear that his favorite word is "anticipate," a term that assumes near-philosophical overtones. Anticipation is Grade's preferred state of mind and one that he seeks to arouse in beholders: "When I present these structures before they go into the wild, especially if shown alongside projects that have already been exposed to the elements, it is an interesting exercise for viewers to anticipate and predict what will happen next." Grade's choreographed suspense would ideally spur us to realize that nothing is "finished" and everything changes, however minutely. We just need to keep attuned to these subtle developments. And we must surely stay tuned for *Circuit: The Stage* and for future episodes of Grade's gripping saga of sculptural form enduring the forces of entropy. ♦

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STORY BY  
Suzanne Ramjiak

Grade's outdoor works can be seen as variants of performance art, rather than as environmental or land art, to which they're often compared. Instead of enlisting his own body as performer, he recruits his crafted surrogates to be ravaged by nature, and then presents the aftermath for public display.



Left: John Grade carrying his sculpture *Collector* into Willapa Bay, WA.

Above: *Collector*, 2006-8, wood, 8 x 72 x 78 in., during its 10 months of submersion in the bay.



Above and left: *Collector* in its first outdoor phase, immersion in Willapa Bay, beginning March 2007, where it provided a bed for oysters to collect and grow while also acquiring seaweed, barnacles and other marine life.

practice of sculptural stagecraft. This move would eventually lead his work out of the gallery and into the land. Just as *Cleave* stages an embodiment experience for the viewer, placing us in a vulnerable space, Grade's later sculptures would be cast into the open, naked and at the mercy of nature.

Through discussions with writers and musicians, Grade began to view sculpture less as a static object and more as a composition with narrative sweep. "My earlier works disappeared into collections, and seemed to be finished within a context of preservation," explains Grade. "But this is an artificial sense of closure. The pieces aren't really finished, and they'll eventually degrade, although there's no longer an opportunity to witness this specific degradation." So he set out to direct and record the private life of aging sculptures, becoming an impresario of entropy. In this regard, Grade's outdoor works can be seen as variants of performance art, rather than as environmental or land art, to which they're often compared. Instead of enlisting his own body as performer, he recruits his crafted surrogates to be ravaged by nature, and then presents the aftermath for public display.

Such is the story of *Collector*, 2006-8. Grade's breakthrough work. A wooden armature resembling a pair of large tusks, *Collector*, as the title implies, was designed to glean data from the wild. The sculpture's itinerary included 10 months of submersion in a Pacific Coast bay, where it gathered seaweed, oysters and other marine life. It was then transported to the southern Utah desert, where birds could feast on the aquatic crust and the sun could roast it dry. Following the structure's secluded adventures, it was put on exhibit with documentary photos so viewers could fathom the de-evolution

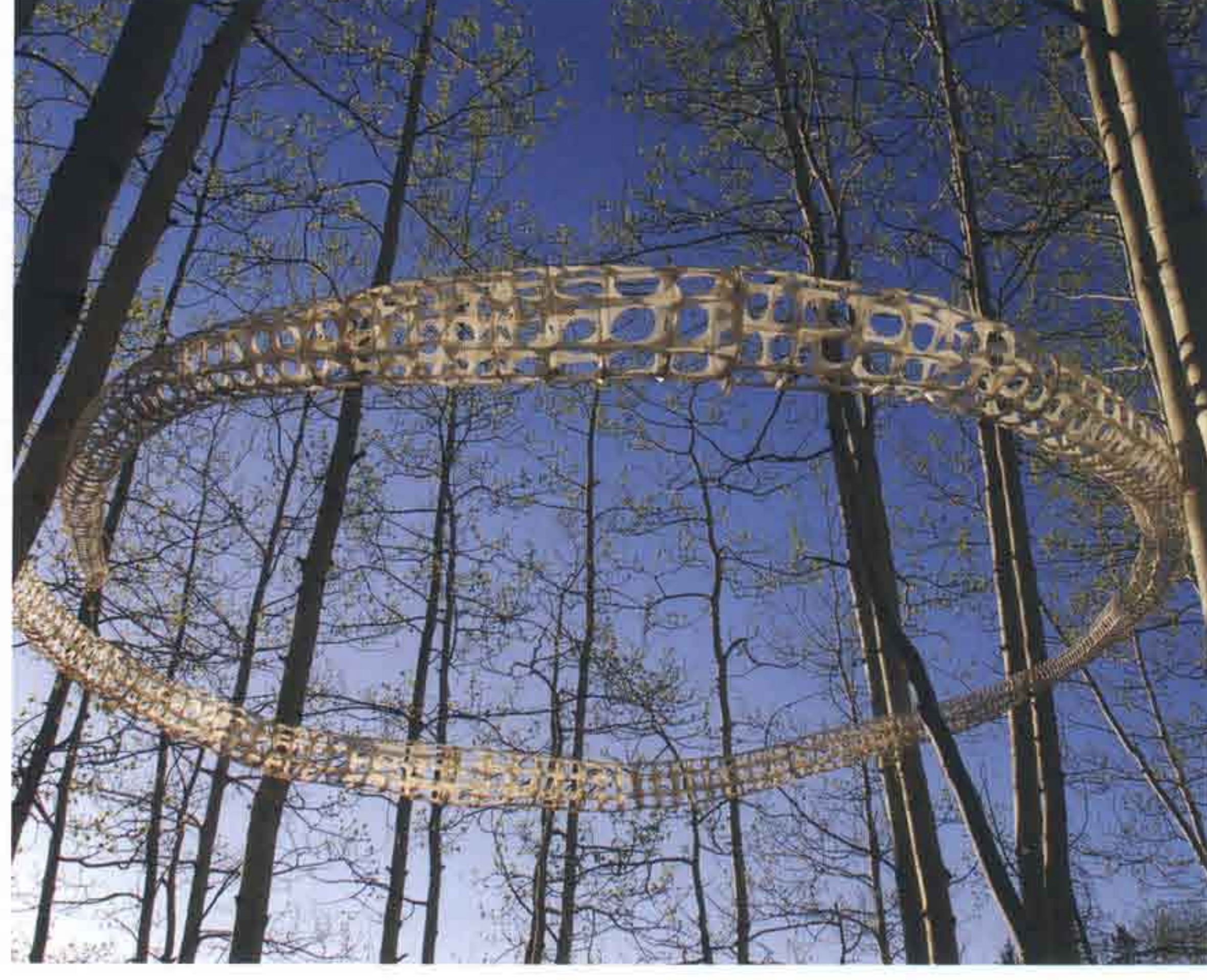
Below and right: Grade intended *Host*, 2007, as a sculptural bird feeder. Made of cellulose, seed, ripe pulp and cap-sicum, 1 x 12 x 12 ft., it was installed in several different sites in the Kaibab National Forest, AZ, until success was achieved—birds were attracted and other creatures deterred—in a birch grove.



of the form. Henceforth, Grade would create sculptural protagonists that would brave the elements and return with tales writ large on their plundered bodies.

*Collector* also represented a new paradigm for Grade: nature became a collaborator, not just a muse for his art. In keeping with this altered modus operandi, Grade also changed his criteria for creative success. A successful work was no longer one that fit a preset formal notion. Control was now commingled with chance. As Grade explained about a recent project, "It will be a success when there is evidence of a compelling balance between what I have anticipated and chance events that affect the work in unexpected ways." He takes pleasure in predicting how forms will respond to a given context and whether their course will unfold as imagined. "You let go of a certain amount of control, just not all of it," Grade concedes.

The artist's revised recipe for success was tested by his next nature-based work, *Host*, 2007. The ratio of intent and accident in *Host* was less than desirable, requiring adjustments during its wilderness stint. A circular structure, 12 feet in diameter, was cast in cellulose and covered with seeds to form a sculptural feeder. Grade envisioned birds as co-conspirators, who would destroy the piece as it dispensed its fare. During its first two sittings in an Arizona forest, *Host* proved more attractive to insects and rodents. In its third



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